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The Annotated Mariner: Reading and Writing in the Margins

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The Rime of the Ancient Mariner
Annotations discussion and writing exercise

The Annotated *Mariner*: Reading and Writing in the Margins

Abstract: This activity, which incorporates students' imaginative writing, uses Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 1817 annotations to his *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* as a model for literary response and interpretation. Through guided discussion, students will first examine selected marginalia from Coleridge's poem as an attempt to read the narrative through a particular interpretive lens. Afterwards, working in pairs or groups, students write their own glosses to the poem from the perspective and in the voice of assigned figures. By exploring Coleridge's glosses and comparing their own, students will see how readers' backgrounds shape reading and understanding of a literary text.

Common Core Standards:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.1
Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.5
Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text (e.g., the choice of where to begin or end a story, the choice to provide a comedic or tragic resolution) contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.6
Analyze a case in which grasping a point of view requires distinguishing what is directly stated in a text from what is really meant (e.g., satire, sarcasm, irony, or understatement).

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.7
Analyze multiple interpretations of a story, drama, or poem (e.g., recorded or live production of a play or recorded novel or poetry), evaluating how each version interprets the source text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.3.A
Engage and orient the reader by setting out a problem, situation, or observation and its significance, establishing one or multiple point(s) of view, and introducing a narrator and/or characters; create a smooth progression of experiences or events.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.9
Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

Procedure:

Have students read a print or online edition of Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* with the marginalia or "glosses" that he added for the 1817 collection of his verse in *Sibylline Leaves*. I recommend the 1970 Dover edition with the illustrations by Gustave Doré, which function as a visual gloss on the poem. Teachers should note to students that the first version of the poem appeared in the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads*, a founding document of British literary Romanticism co-written with William Wordsworth. Interested teachers may have students compare the earlier and later versions of the poem as a case study in literary revision. The archaic spelling and syntax of the original version were meant to make it seem like a manuscript recovered from an earlier age. Teachers should instruct students to read Coleridge's annotations for the 1817 version not as an appendage to the text (à la SparkNotes) but as an integral part of it.

Examining Coleridge's glosses, teachers should point out that the Glosser (not identified by name) is as much a presence in the poem as the Mariner or Wedding-Guest. In fact, the Glosser serves as the reader's companion and guide, much like the Mariner does for the Wedding-Guest. The Glosser is Coleridge's designated interpreter, an imaginary reader who leaves his mark on the text. In a poem of journeys (physical, psychological, and spiritual), the Glosser rides shotgun and sporadically intervenes in our reading with comments that range from the summative to the interpretive and the digressive.

Adding another voice to the poem, the Glosser provides one way of seeing the story. He emerges as a rationalist and moralist who is uncomfortable with strong emotion and the supernatural, which he defuses through his learning. The glosses give us an incomplete interpretation, ignoring some things (like the impact of the experience on the Mariner) and imposing others. In a poem that is all about interpretation, even the Glosser himself doesn't have the final word, as students will come to see.

To get to know the Glosser, ask students to comment on the glosses of Part I in terms of their content and tone. Aside from the anachronistic early modern "-eth" endings of a couple verbs, the first few glosses are straightforward, matter-of-fact summaries of dialogue and action. Students might see them as a handy and reliable guide to the plot and even the meaning of the poem. To counter this tendency, teachers should ask students to compare the fifth gloss ("The ship drawn by a storm toward the south pole") to the Mariner's description of the scene and to explain what the Glosser leaves out. Students should be able to see that whereas the Mariner personifies the storm, the Glosser treats it literally, leaving out the Mariner's vivid imagery and figurative language. This contrast helps to characterize the Glosser, at least for the moment, as being more concerned with objective experiences than with subjective responses.

Students should also compare the Mariner's account of the poem's albatross with the Glosser's account. Initially, the Glosser takes his cue from the Mariner, associating the bird's arrival with the icebound ship's change in fortune. The Glosser's moralistic voice first emerges in the final gloss of Part 1. When the Mariner shoots the albatross, the accompanying gloss

reads, “The ancient Mariner inhospitably killeth the pious bird of good omen,” making the bird sound sacred. The Glosser follows the lead of the Mariner’s shipmates in identifying the bird as a source of good luck.

However, the Glosser begins to make connections the Mariner doesn’t see, as teachers will want to help students see. Teachers might ask, “Where in Parts 2 and 3 do the glosses go beyond what the Mariner sees or says?” When the fog clears after the albatross’s death, the Mariner’s shipmates arbitrarily justify his killing of the bird, associating it with the bad weather. In their attempt to make sense of the world, the glosser claims that they “make themselves accomplices in his crime,” though his conclusion seems as unjustified as the crew’s. When the ship is becalmed and the crew is dying of thirst, the Glosser notes, “And the Albatross begins to be avenged,” himself trying to order a world which isn’t making sense. The next-to-last gloss of Part 2 reveals the Glosser’s rationalist tendencies, as he validates the spirits the crew dreams of not by faith, but by scholarly authorities. In Part 3, readers wouldn’t know that Life-in-Death wins the Mariner or begins her work on him without the marginalia.

Selected glosses from the rest of the poem will further reveal the disparity between the Glosser and Mariner. The long sixth gloss in Part 4 is lyrical and comforting, emphasizing order and tranquility and describing the universe as home. However, this account of cosmic harmony contradicts the mariner’s sense of flux (“The moving Moon went up the sky, / And nowhere did abide”) and of being literally and figuratively at sea, unable to find a home. The fourth gloss in Part 5 attempts to add precision and a hint of scientific attitude to the Mariner’s account of how the dead crew is reanimated. In Part 6, the Glosser speculates that the Mariner is placed in a trance because his ship is moving “faster than human life could endure.”

Students might also be asked to evaluate the validity of the poem’s ostensible moral, which the Mariner and Glosser both endorse. The Mariner’s tale is supposed to teach the lesson of loving God’s creation, “All things both great and small; / For the dear God who loveth us, He made and loveth all.” But does God love the Mariner? After all, his punishment seems unending, as he walks the earth, telling his tale when the spirit moves him. The Wedding-Guest’s “stunned” response to hearing the Mariner’s tale suggests an alternative conclusion: the universe is flux. Neither logic (Glosser) nor religion (Glosser, Mariner) can explain meanings which either elude us or don’t exist at all. Perhaps we impose our own meaning on what we experience, like the Mariner, and, like the Glosser, on what we read.

After students have discussed selected glosses, which might take up a whole class period, it’s time to have them try their hand at writing their own glosses to the poem. Provide a list of celebrities, talk show hosts, popular authors, or even fictional characters, assigning them to students in pairs or groups. Alternatively, students could come up with their own glossers. Give each group a part of the poem to annotate as their glosser might, using that individual’s voice and perspective. Students should be selective in what they comment upon. Have students share, justify, and compare their commentaries as interpretations that will ideally provide new insights into the Mariner’s experiences and the act of reading itself.